

Roca and its Aegean Contacts in the Recent Bronze Age

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Abstract: The archaeological exploration of the peninsula of Roca (Lecce), carried out by the University of Salento, has brought to light one of the most important prehistoric settlements in the central Mediterranean. During recent years, an important stratigraphic sequence was explored in the northwest sector of the settlement (Area IX), near the internal front of the protohistoric fortification walls, and this had seven distinct occupation phases from the beginning of Recent Bronze Age 2 to Final Bronze Age 2. A large quantity of Aegean-type ceramics, both imported and locally made, were found in the Recent Bronze Age levels; moreover, the presence of many faunal remains led us to hypothesise celebrations of sacrifices and ritual meals. Various archaeological data converge to suggest that in this period Roca became an important node in a large-scale Mediterranean trade network and acquired the character of a community colony, with a significant group of Aegean immigrants.

Keywords: Roca, Recent Bronze Age, Aegean contacts, Aegean-type pottery, Aegean immigrants

Our knowledge of the Recent Bronze Age at Roca has increased considerably during the last decade. Excavations confirmed that in this period new fortifications, characterised by inclined or stepped walls, were mostly constructed with squared limestone blocks. Both the materials and building techniques reveal a sudden change and a clear improvement compared to the fortifications of the Middle Bronze Age, when the walls were constructed using mainly raw or roughly worked slabs² (Fig. 1).

After a possible brief period of abandonment,³ these new fortifications incorporated the ruins of the monumental defensive structures destroyed during Middle Bronze Age 3. Detailed analysis of their remains revealed an intense building activity, concentrated in a relatively short period of time, with traces of partial destructions, reconstructions, enlargements and an increase in the elevations of the structures.

In addition to the rebuilding of the fortifications, the evidence indicates a process of spatial reorganisation within the settlement, with the creation of a zone dedicated to ritual and cultic practices (that we have sometimes described as a kind of ‘Cult Centre’) in the northwestern sector of the settlement.

In this area (Area IX) a thick stratigraphy revealed a rich sequence of occupation levels, which allowed us to detect seven distinct occupation phases, datable between the Recent Bronze Age (phases I–V) and the Final Bronze Age (phases VI–VII),⁴ and to bring to light remains of several structures. The most recent and best preserved of them is the monumental building (nick-named Temple-Hut), which has been partially published.⁵

In this stratigraphic sequence the deepest levels, pertaining to phases I and II, were mainly composed of large layers of ash and charcoal and contained abundant ceramics and large quantities of animal bones, partly blackened by contact with fire and with clear signs of butchering. As

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² Guglielmino – Pagliara 2004, 567–568; Scarano 2012.

³ Guglielmino 2005, 639.

⁴ Pagliara et al. 2008.

⁵ Malorgio – Maggiulli 2011; Maggiulli – Malorgio 2012; Maggiulli – Malorgio 2017.



Fig. 1 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Inner front of the fortification wall (photo: R. Guglielmino)

regards the formation of these deposits, the nature and disposition of the finds led to the hypothesis of an iteration of public ritual activities, which likely included the celebration of bloody sacrifices and libations, the lighting of fires, the consumption of communal meals and probably the intentional breakage of vessels.⁶ The traces connected to such practices were located in a shallow natural depression, which in all probability was previously cleared of older deposits, because of the almost complete absence of traces of previous Middle Bronze Age occupation.⁷

In Area IX the entire stratigraphic sequence yielded large quantities of indigenous *impasto* and Aegean-type pottery (both imported and of local imitation);⁸ in some strata the latter exceeded ten percent of the total number of vessels.⁹ This abundance is exceptional for an extra-Aegean settlement context, not only in the central Mediterranean,¹⁰ and is likely to be connected with the particular function of the area, since until now it has not been observed in other sectors of the site. In this regard, it is worth mentioning how the recovery of abundant fine and exotic ceramics is a widespread phenomenon in cultic contexts documented in many areas and periods. In addition to the abundance, the richness and the multiplicity of fabrics, forms and decorative motifs, the Aegean-type pottery stands out because it is highly reconstructable, an unusual feature in material coming from a settlement.

In the lower levels of phases I and II, the large number of deep bowls (Fig. 2), the good quantity of kraters and dippers (Fig. 3) among the attested shapes and the presence of some mineralised grape pips, analysed by Milena Primavera, led to speculation that wine was one of the beverages that were consumed in Area IX.¹¹

⁶ Guglielmino 2009a, 188–189.

⁷ Pagliara et al. 2008.

⁸ Guglielmino et al. 2010.

⁹ Iacono 2015.

¹⁰ Cf. Blake 2008.

¹¹ Primavera 2018, 46–51. It is worth recalling that in Mycenaean Greece dippers, kraters and deep bowls are almost always attested together in feasting contexts and are probably to be associated with wine consumption. Cf. Borgna 2004, 268.

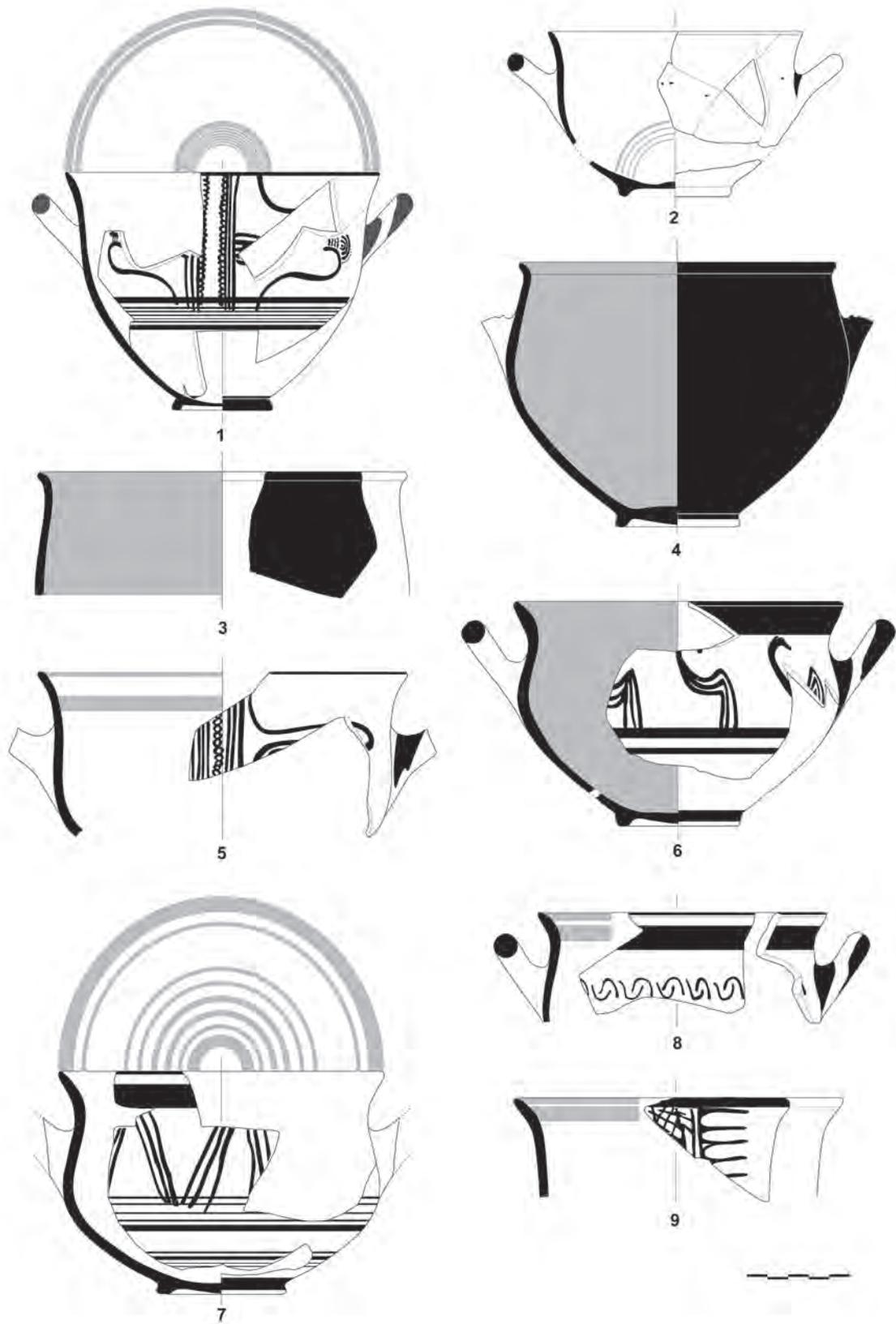


Fig. 2 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area IX. Aegean-type pottery: 1–4. Phase I; 5–9. Phase II. Scale 1:3 (drawings: R. Guglielmino, L. Coluccia, F. Iacono)

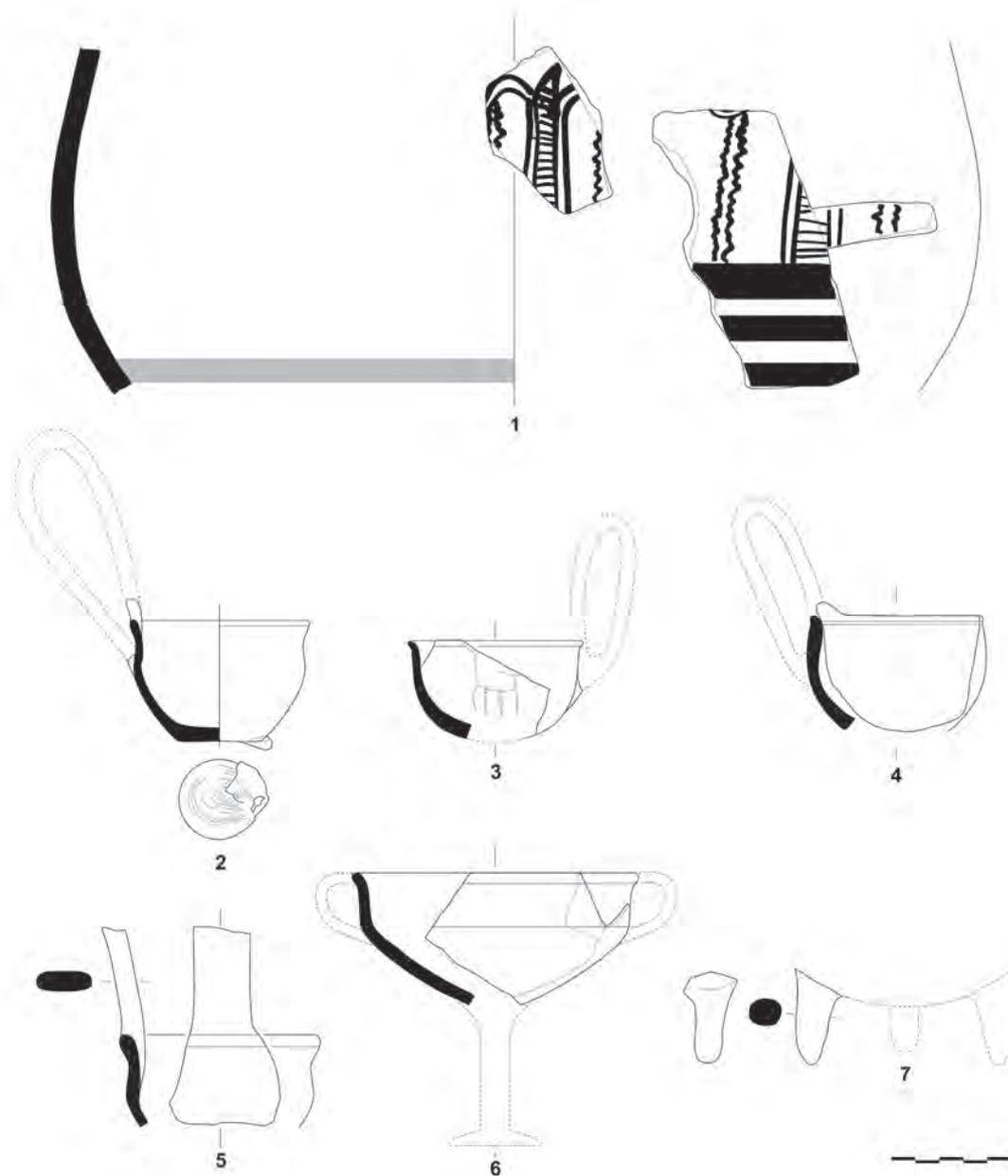


Fig. 3 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area IX. Aegean-type pottery: 1, 5. Phase II; 2–4, 6–7. Phase I. Scale 1:3 (drawings: R. Guglielmino, L. Coluccia, F. Iacono)

Moreover, at the end of phase II, big selected parts and entire quarters of large animals rich in meat (oxen, goats and pigs) were deposited together with vegetable offerings (wheat sheaves, branches of oak and myrtle) and large amounts of pottery and then buried under a thick layer of crushed limestone. The taphonomic and osteological study conducted by Michela Rugge revealed that the animal parts, found in anatomical connection (Fig. 4), were neither burnt nor defleshed for meat consumption, but were deposited with all their soft tissues intact.¹² These rich offerings may perhaps be interpreted as part of a foundation ritual, since the limestone layer marks a major urban reorganisation of this settlement area; the plant elements may belong to garlands or wreaths that

¹² Pagliara et al. 2008.



Fig. 4 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area IX. Phase II. Ox bones in anatomical connection (photo: R. Guglielmino)

were worn by those performing the sacrifice or may have adorned the victims, something similar to what probably happened in the Aegean world.¹³

The rich mixed assemblages of local handmade *impasto* and Aegean-type wheel-turned pottery coming from Area IX certainly contribute to establishing an interregional comparative chronology in order to link the local south Italian sequence to the Mycenaean and Minoan ones.¹⁴ The great majority of Aegean and Aegean-type vessels coming from the bottom levels date to the period between LH IIIB2 and IIIC Early, that is to decades around and immediately after 1200 BC, which are the chronological core of this meeting. Nevertheless, the historical framework is complicated by the occasional presence of residual materials and by the fact that Italo-Mycenaean products do not always follow the same standards as the genuine Mycenaean ones. They show, in fact, some evident oddities, hybridisations and chronological delays.¹⁵

From the same levels of phases I and II come also numerous fragments of coarse-ware stirrup jars.¹⁶ These transport jars are very scarce in the central Mediterranean and, just as we suspected, chemical analyses seem to confirm that they came from western Crete, which all authors recognise as the main production area.¹⁷ We supposed that they were possibly used to carry some kind of scented oils.¹⁸

In addition to Lustrous Decorated Ware, a fair amount of Mycenaean unpainted ware was also found. It includes both closed and open shapes (Figs. 3, 5) and offers some of the most interesting data concerning the relationship with the Aegean world. Open shapes are represented by *kylikes* and chiefly by dippers, which have semi-globular or slightly carinated bowls. One of our dippers has incised parallel lines at the lower handle attachment, as do some examples from Laconia.¹⁹ Closed shapes (apparently jugs, amphorae and hydriai) have rather thin walls and do not seem

¹³ Cf. Warren 1985; Warren 2005, 148; Rehak 1995, 446; Younger 1995, 509–510.

¹⁴ Cf. Jung 2006, 145–148; Jones et al. 2014, 75–83.

¹⁵ Cf. Jones et al. 2014, 67; Jung, Guglielmino, Iacono and Mommsen, this volume.

¹⁶ The exact number of these large vessels can hardly be determined with certainty by simple autopsy, because their fabrics are very similar.

¹⁷ Guglielmino et al. 2010.

¹⁸ Guglielmino 2009b, 487. We are planning gas chromatographic analyses on a selection of fragments.

¹⁹ Catling 2009, figs. 168, 241, 305.

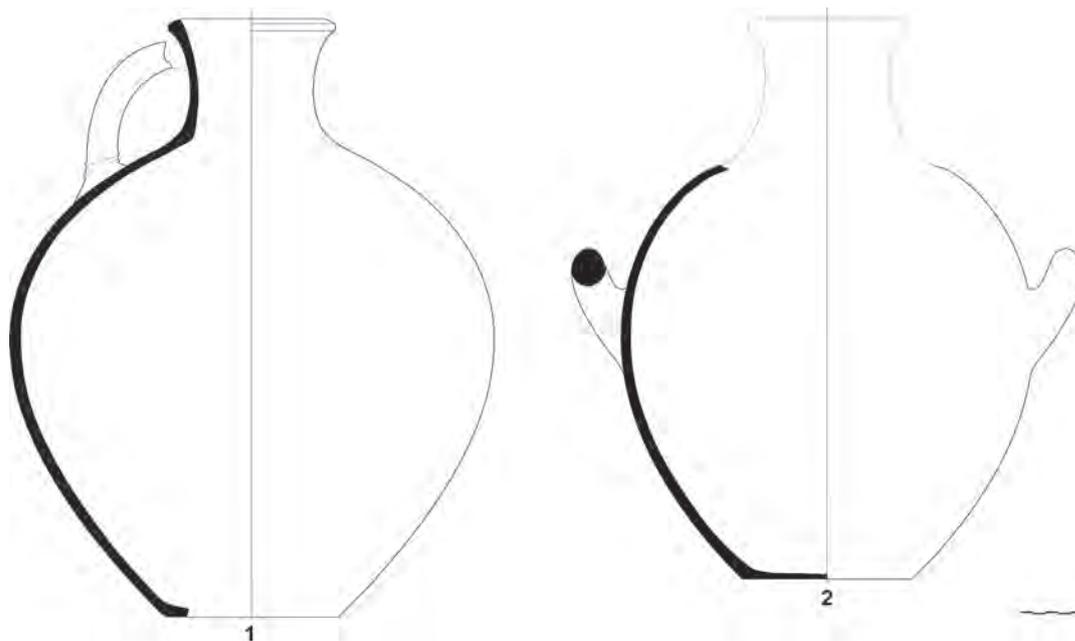


Fig. 5 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area IX. Phase I. Aegean-type pottery. Scale 1:6
(drawings: R. Guglielmino, L. Coluccia, F. Iacono)

well-suited for transport over long distances. Another fragment seems to be a leg of a small tripod pot or brazier.

So far, the only unpainted vessel selected for chemical analysis was found to be imported (Fig. 5.1).²⁰ However, regardless of whether the unpainted vessels are imported or not, we must keep in mind that wherever plain and domestic pottery has been found outside the Aegean, as at Miletus and Iasos on the Anatolian coasts and Tell Kazel in Syria, it has been considered as evidence for a high degree of Aegean influence and for a probable presence of Aegean immigrants.²¹

In fact, when compared to other Italian centres, Roca provides rich evidence in favour of the presence of an exogenous minority among the indigenous population; in this regard, one of the most eloquent data is certainly constituted by the discovery in a context of phase III of a purple steatite lentoid seal, unfortunately very worn, which shows a schematic representation of a quadruped.²² The find belongs, in fact, to a category of artefacts which is extraneous to the indigenous culture, is usually excluded from commercial channels and is almost unknown in the central Mediterranean.

It is attributable to a group defined by Younger as the ‘Mainland Popular Group’, which is documented by a large number of examples in soft stone. These seals were produced by workshops operating in Mycenaean Greece between LH IIIA2 and IIIB and have been found mainly in non-palatial centres;²³ two examples even come from the Uluburun wreck.²⁴ It is assumed that the seals of this group, which were not used for administrative purposes,²⁵ functioned mainly as identity markers and were transmitted from generation to generation among the other *keimelia*.²⁶

²⁰ Jung, Guglielmino, Iacono and Mommsen, this volume.

²¹ Mee 1998; van Wijngaarden 2002; Kaiser 2005; Niemeier 2005 with bibl.; Jung 2011.

²² Pagliara et al. 2008, 266–267; Iacono 2010.

²³ Guglielmino 2013, 148–149 with bibl. The seal was attributed to this group by Olga Krzyszkowska (personal communication to Francesco Iacono).

²⁴ Pulak 2005, 305.

²⁵ A clay nodule from Thebes, which bears the impression of a seal of this group is, so far, a unique exception (Eder 2007, 38; Flouda 2010, 63).

²⁶ Moschos 2009, 379, n. 148 with bibl.

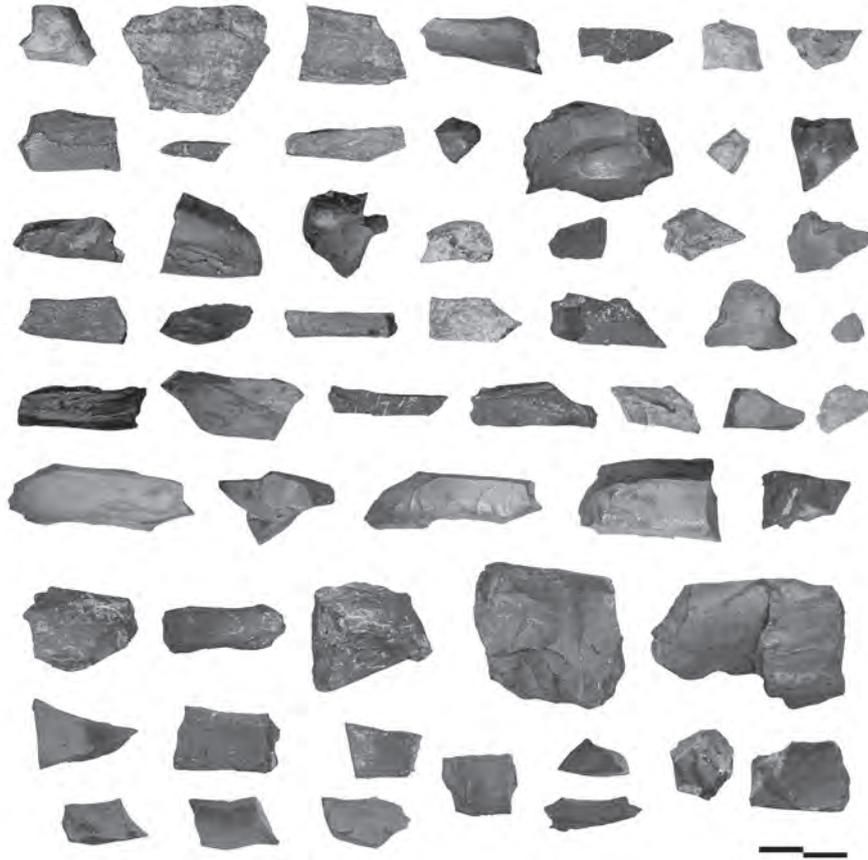


Fig. 6 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area X. Phase III. Fragments of hippopotamus ivory (photo: R. Guglielmino)

The seal from Roca is the only one of this type found in Italy and it is hard to imagine that it belonged to an indigenous owner.

A few dozen metres south of Area IX, part of a Recent Bronze Age 2 structure has been explored in Area X. Although its size does not seem impressive, there are good reasons not to attribute a merely dwelling function to this construction. In fact, it had a wing destined for craft activities related to the processing of bone and similar materials.²⁷ Such materials present various steps of the *chaîne opératoire*, including several semi-worked fragments of turtle shell (*Caretta caretta*) and raw hippopotamus ivory (many fragments of lower incisors and canines) (Fig. 6), which is ‘more challenging to work than elephant tusks’.²⁸

The turtle shell fragments are the sole evidence in Bronze Age Italy for a luxury craft activity which acquired greater importance and diffusion in later Antiquity, mainly for the manufacture of inlay for furniture (Plin., *HN*, 9.12.35–39); among them a marginal carapace scute was worked to produce a thin rhomboid plate (Fig. 7).

Ivory is a raw material of great value that could be designated ultra-exotic in Italy, because it was already exotic in Mycenaean Greece, from where it was probably imported. Roca’s evidence constitutes the most ancient attestation of ivory-working in Italy;²⁹ it seems not unlikely that the introduction of the precious substance and of the specialised and sophisticated technology related to its processing³⁰ is to be attributed to resident Aegean immigrants. Furthermore, the short

²⁷ Pagliara et al. 2007.

²⁸ Burns 1999, 118 with bibl.

²⁹ Guglielmino et al. 2011.

³⁰ Cf. Barnett 1982; Evely 1993, 219–256.



Fig. 7 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area X. Phase III. Worked turtle shell fragment (photo: R. Guglielmino)

distance of this workshop from the cultic area could not be accidental; evidence for ivory carving, in fact, has been found in the Cult Centre of Mycenae and has been considered possible evidence for a ‘workshop-shrine association’.³¹

Moreover, in Mycenaean Greece ivory working was mainly a palace-sponsored craft,³² as we can clearly infer from some Pylos and Knossos tablets.³³ The Ta series from Pylos, for example, is an inventory of luxurious furniture and deals with tables, thrones and footstools decorated with ivory elements, which were probably used on the occasion of a major commensal and sacrificial ceremony.³⁴ In this regard, one must also consider that the Ivory Houses at Mycenae, where we have by far the highest concentration of manufactured and semi-finished ivory pieces and where many Linear B tablets were brought to light, have been identified as residences of palace officials.³⁵

Therefore, it is very likely that the ivory craft would operate primarily for an elite and palatial clientele, as seems confirmed by its rapid decline in the immediate aftermath of the Mycenaean palaces collapse.³⁶ In light of these data and of their evident social implications, it is difficult to imagine that at Roca, a few decades after the fall of the Mycenaean palaces,³⁷ the oldest on-site working of ivory started in an ordinary hut through the initiative of an anonymous craftsman to satisfy the demands of equally anonymous customers.

Perhaps more than anywhere else in the central Mediterranean, it is hard to believe that at Roca the Aegean immigrants were exclusively potters. It seems probable that they included also other figures, not unlike what is supposed for the Italian immigrants who settled in various places in the Aegean.³⁸ I think that the model that seems to fit best with the cultural profile of Roca in this period is the ‘community colony’, as delineated by Branigan, which implies the presence of a group of Aegean immigrants; a group numerically not calculable, but certainly neither the majority nor the dominant component of the population living in this centre.³⁹ It is reasonable to assume, however, that this minority contributed significantly to the technological and socio-economic development of the indigenous community.

In conclusion we can say that at Roca many archaeological data have been collected which clearly testify to strong and frequent contacts with the Aegean world. These contacts seem to reach their greatest intensity around 1200 BC, when we register the highest percentages of Aege-

³¹ Lupack 2008, 19–43, 141–142.

³² Burns 1999, 144–146; Bachhuber 2006, 351, n. 63 with bibl.

³³ Palaima 1991; Shelmerdine 1998, 291; Burns 2010, 108.

³⁴ Ventris – Chadwick 1956, 342–344; Palaima 2004.

³⁵ Voutsaki 2010, 603 with bibl.

³⁶ Rehak – Younger 1998, 252–254.

³⁷ Radiometric dates for our workshop are published in Pagliara et al. 2007, 356–357.

³⁸ It has been supposed that these immigrants included metalworkers, mercenaries, slaves and *clientes* (cf. Bettelli 2002, 130–132; Hallager – Hallager 2003a, 287–288; Hallager 2003, 257; Bettelli 2006, 140–157; Bettelli 2009, 96; Bettelli 2010, 122–123; Jung – Mehofer 2013).

³⁹ Guglielmino 2013 with bibl.; in this regard, cf. Bettelli 2002, 14.

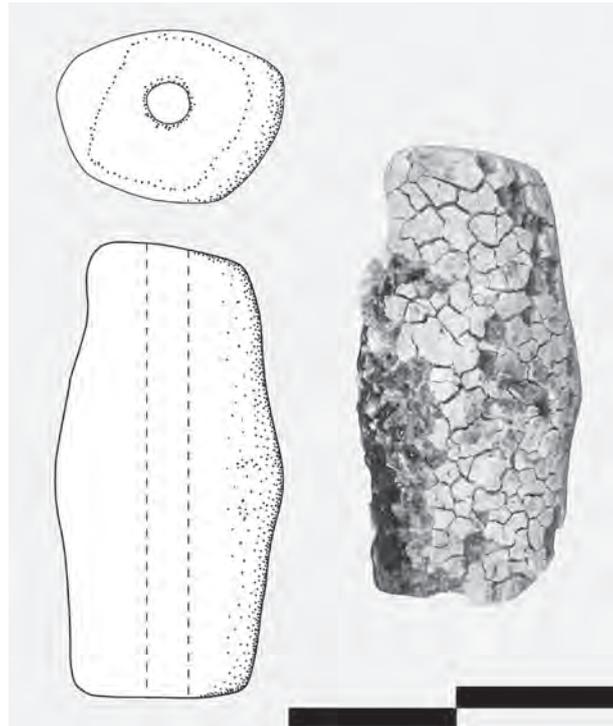


Fig. 8 Roca (Lecce). Recent Bronze Age. Area IX. Phase II. Amber bead of Tiryns type (drawing and photo: R. Guglielmino)

an-type ceramics, both imported and made locally, which clearly include Minoan and Minoanising products. In this period Roca probably served as an important node in a large-scale Mediterranean trade network.

Among other notable evidence for this role during Recent Bronze Age 2, we must also number two large bronze pins with spherical heads of the Italian Franzine type coming from phase I,⁴⁰ a Tiryns-type amber bead from phase II, which is one of the most ancient examples in Italy (Fig. 8), and a ring-handled knife close to the central European Baierdorf type from phase V.⁴¹ The local *impasto* decoration also shows close contacts with the *terramare* area in northern Italy.⁴²

As we have seen, various data converge to suggest the presence of resident foreigners, probably coming from different Aegean regions; this presence probably dates back to Middle Bronze Age 3, when production of Italo-Aegean ceramics starts. It seems reasonable to assume that the long coexistence and association at the same site, which continued for many generations, may have triggered profound integration and reciprocal influence processes, including, but certainly not limited to, the handicraft sphere.

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⁴⁰ Maggiulli 2017. Pins of this type were not attested so far south of the Po valley (Carancini 1975, 197–198).

⁴¹ Pagliara et al. 2008, 264, fig. 15B.V.2; 267.

⁴² Pagliara et al. 2008.

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